



**THE BIBLE, CHRISTIAN CONVERSION AND EXPRESSION:
THE CASE OF THE TALENSI OF THE UPPER EAST REGION OF GHANA**
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ABSTRACT

Throughout the ages, God had demonstrated His desire to be encountered by all humans in every race. The Bible constitutes the medium of God's self-disclosure for all humanity and contains His purposes for the world. Throughout Christian history, the Christian church had used the Bible for its evangelistic and discipleship activities. The Great Commission, which is Jesus' mandate to his disciples and by extension to all Christian believers stipulates that, the Christian message be communicated to all people in every part of the world. This presupposes that all humans irrespective of language or ethnicity are to hear the gospel, understand it and appropriate it in their socio-cultural and political realms. For a long time, the Talensi language has not had a literary tradition and the people have been without the Judeo-Christian scriptures in their mother tongue. However, churches have been established in some Talensi communities. These churches draw their membership from the native population. This paper investigates how the Talensi have come to encounter the Christian faith and are expressing it in their daily lives. The paper contends that if the Bible constitutes the medium of God's self-disclosure for all humanity, then the Talensi have a legitimate right to have the Bible in their mother tongue. They need to hear God speak to them directly in their mother tongue instead of through any other language. It is recommended that the Talensi language be reduced into writing and the Judeo-Christian Scriptures translated into the Talensi language to enable the Talensi own the Scriptures and the Christian faith.

Key Words: Missions, Gospel, Conversion, Mother Tongue, translation, appropriation

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, God has demonstrated His desire to encounter all humans. Scholars have established that God has revealed himself in diverse ways to people in every age. Idowu, cited by Gehman maintains that "There is only one God who reveals Himself in different ways to all races. This one God reveals Himself in ways which each understands. All religions are therefore the result of God's loving activity among all the peoples of the world."² It stands to reason that God's purposes have to be made manifest to all people as He so desires. In Habakkuk 2:14 we read that the prophet foresaw the revelation of God's purposes by saying that the whole earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. Again in 2 Peter 3:18 the apostle Peter admonished Christian believers to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus. From these scriptural passages we can deduce that it is God's purpose and will that all humankind come to know and encounter Him. The message of God's purposes and His intervention in human history as well as His divine purposes has been the subject of Christian missions throughout

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² Richard J. Gehman. *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1989.), 249.

Christian history. The Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28: 19 – 20 is believed by Christians as the church's mandate to proclaim God's divine purposes to all humanity throughout the world.

The Bible, which is the embodiment of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, is recognized by Christians as the record of God's engagement with humans at different times and in different areas. The call of Abraham as recorded in Genesis Chapter 12 spells out God's specific purpose for Israel as "a nation" of choice. It also embodies God's universal scope as spelling out in His desire to encounter "the nations". It is evident from biblical history that God's dealings with the nations (Gentiles) culminated in the establishment of churches in Gentile territories of the Roman and Greek worlds, in the early church period.

Andrews Walls has intimated that the Christian gospel is linguistically and culturally translatable, when it encounters new cultures.³ What this means is that no one culture can monopolise the Christian message. People of every generation have the right to encounter the Christian faith in their own socio-cultural and political realms. In Romans 10: 17 we are told that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. This presupposes that for a people to develop faith in Christianity, the Christian message or gospel has to be proclaimed in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them. Acceptance of the message therefore, depends on how the people understand the message that is coming to them. The significance of language in the Christian missionary enterprise is therefore, imperative.

The story of the Pentecost event as recorded in Acts chapter 2 also attests to the fact that God seeks to be encountered by all people of every background. In line with this, Ekem underscores the basis of the Pentecost event as affirming the use of various mother tongues for the proclamation of the gospel. In his view it also consolidates an earlier process of Mother tongue translation in the Post – exilic period in Israel's history when the returnees from exile needed an 'interpretation' of the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic (Neh. 8:8).⁴ These returnees had lost command of the Hebrew language, and therefore needed to hear God's message in their adopted language, Aramaic.

Mbiti has noted that African Christians in their quest to be faithful to the historical Christian faith have stressed the need to construct African theology on sound biblical foundations. In African theological reflection of the Christian faith, the primacy of the scriptures in shaping such reflection is critical.⁵ This position presupposes that all Christian theology is based on the scriptures, and no Christian theology could be formulated and interpreted meaningfully without the scriptures. This is why Dickson believes that since the Bible had the people of the Ancient Near East as its intended audience, it follows that one can properly understand its presuppositions only when that local context is taken into consideration.⁶

What this means is that, for a people to accept the Christian faith as enshrined in the Bible, its message may have to be communicated in such a way that it speaks to their needs. Bediako underscores this position by saying that "the ability to hear in one's own language and to express in one's own language one's response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounter with the divine realm."⁷ It is through language, and for that matter, the mother tongue that God speaks to communicate His purposes to the human community as demonstrated by the Pentecost event in Acts chapter 2. People must hear God speak to them directly in their respective languages. This opens the doors for a much more genuine and lasting theological dialogue with people of every background to take place. The Bible is a universal document meant for all people and cultures and should therefore be made accessible to all people through their respective languages. The scriptures in any languages become the connection to what God has always been doing in the life of the Jewish nation, in history. Through the mother tongue scriptures, therefore, God is breaking through to link with particular peoples, to enable them to hear what He has been saying all the time throughout human history, and His purposes for all humanity for all time.

³ Andrew F. Walls. "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture; " Faith and Thought, Vol 108, no. 1 – 2, (1981), 39 – 54

⁴John D.K Ekem, "Re – appraising the History and Place of Mother tongue Bible Translations". Journal of African Christian Thought, Vol 15, no. 2 (2012), 10 – 14.

⁵John S. Mbiti. *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. (London: OUP, 1971),....

⁶ Kwesi A. Dickson. *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*. (ManyKnoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, (1991), 133

⁷Kwame Bediako. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non – Western Religion*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh (University Press, 1995), 60.

Thus, what God began to do with Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others in biblical history, He now continues to do among every people today in their various mother tongue scriptures.

The Talensi as an indigenous people group, have been shaped by their own historical, cultural and religious past. With the introduction of Christianity among them, many churches have sprung up drawing their membership from the native population. However, it is significant to note that the Talensi do not have the Judeo – Christian Scriptures in their mother tongue and this has negatively affected Christian conversion and expression among the people.

Propositions by some Ghanaian scholars on the significant role of Mother Tongue Bible Translations for Christian mission

John Ekem, in reappraising the history and place of mother tongue Bible translations, has noted that “the key underlying factor has been the attempt to re-package the message of the Judeo – Christian Scriptures other than the original recipients. The quality of this re-packaging exercise has varied from place to place, yet today, it can safely be concluded that mother tongue Bible translations have contributed immensely to language development, literacy, church growth and a deeper understanding of the scriptures.⁸ In rooting for mother tongue Bible translation, Ekem is emphatic that the church in Ghana cannot do without them; for the reason that Ghanaian Christians must hear God speak to them directly in their respective languages. Kwesi Dickson on his part maintains that it is not out of place to think of God being close to all people in the particularity of their life situations. In his view God was not only the God of the Jews, He is also God for all people. He suggests that scripture ought to be heard to be speaking to people in the particularity of their life situations⁹. The position of Dickson is that the scriptures, being a particular historical and cultural document of a people, could only be meaningful and relevant to other people when they are applied to their cultural settings. It is only through mother tongue translation, that the Judeo – Christian Scriptures could be seen to be speaking to people in their particular languages.

Kwame Bediako adds his voice to the discussion on the significant role of mother tongue Bible translations, by saying that the translation of the Bible into the mother tongue is an important link in the development of theology in Africa. His reason is that it would not only root the Christian faith in African culture to enhance its acceptability, but would also strengthen the universality of the Christian faith.¹⁰ Bediako’s position presupposes that the mother tongue Bible translation would enable the Christian faith to be accepted and owned by the various cultures it encounters thereby making it universal in scope. Mother tongue Bible translation is thus, a means for the advancement of Christian mission in Africa and Ghana in particular.

In his view about the controversy over the concept of God in the Judeo – Christian scriptures and that of traditional African contexts, James Nkansah-Obrempong has noted that since the inception of Christianity on the African soil, there has been a growing sense of the need to make the Christian faith African in its form and expression. The concern was to uphold the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith and yet express that core belief in a way that would reflect the life and thought of the African religious experience.¹¹ What this means is that through mother tongue Bible translation, Africans, and for that matter Ghanaian Christians, can come to appreciate the Christian faith in their socio-cultural and political realms. In this way, Christianity would then be recognized as truly Ghanaian in nature when the people are able to hear God speak directly to them in their respective languages.

Emmanuel Asante, citing Augustine, suggests that there must be creative interaction of Christian thought and spirituality with the African religio-cultural and philosophical traditions. Such creative

⁸ John D. K. Ekem; “Reappraising the History and Place of Mother tongue Bible Translations, *Journal of African Christian Thought*. Vol 15. no 2 (Dec. 2012), 10 – 14.

⁹ Kwesi A. Dickson. *Theology in Africa* (ManyKnoll, N. Y. Orbis Books, 1984), 19

¹⁰ Kwame Bediako “The Role of Bible Translation in Mother Tongues”. (Conference Paper given at the Africa Area Forum of Wycliff Bible Translators International, Limuru, Kenya, 2001)

¹¹ James Nkansah – Obrempong, “The Contemporary Theological Situation in Africa: An Overview” *Evangelical Review of Theology* Vol. 31 no. 2 (2007), 140 – 150.

interactions must lead to critical appropriation of the religio-cultural and philosophical products of Africa in advancing the gospel.¹² Asante's position presupposes that the rich cultural heritage of Africans can be useful in the interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, and this underscores the place of mother tongue Bible translations for Christianity in Ghana. The acceptance of the Christian faith would largely depend on the understanding that people get from the Christian message based on their respective languages. The translation of the Bible into languages into which people are born and nurtured, are important resources for the proclamation and appropriation of the Christian faith. For a people without the scriptures in their mother tongue, a problem is thus created in terms of understanding and expression of the Christian faith. It also creates a problem for the advancement and consolidation of Christianity among the people. J.E.T Kuwornu-Adjaottor is of the view that Ghanaians believed in God before the Good News about Jesus was brought to them, and they continue to believe in God. He contends that any translation of the Bible that has to do with belief in God should take cognisance of the people's inherent knowledge about God.¹³

It is significant to understand that prior to the advent of Christianity, and western ideas into Africa, African people lived and understood their existence mainly in terms of the beliefs and ideas of the communities to which they belonged. These beliefs and ideas have shaped their lives and have become what is referred to as their worldview. Their relationship with the world around them and the way they perceive the universe and give explanation to events are all shaped by their worldview.

Solomon Sule Saa believes that mother tongue Bible translation is a demonstration that God really speaks all the languages of the world, including the indigenous languages of Africa.¹⁴ In making a case for mother tongue Christianity, Sule-Saa observes that through the use of the Likpakpaaln Bible many cultural aspects of the Konkomba are increasingly being introduced into the church, with the result that the church has taken on a Konkomba character. He adds that when Konkomba songs and drums are introduced within the church worship, for example, the whole church comes alive with people singing from their hearts and dancing with vigour. He concludes that the mother tongue Bible deepens the faith of its users and helps them to interpret their faith with their culture and daily life.¹⁵

This presupposes that no language should be considered as unimportant and should be neglected. If all languages are regarded by God and constitute the vehicle of his self-revelation in Christ, then it is important that all people get the Bible in their native language.

The Focus of this Paper

The paper finds answers to the following questions: To what extent has the Christian faith impacted the Talensi? How has the Christian message been communicated and interpreted to the Talensi and what has been their response? How is the Christian faith expressed by the Talensi?

Methodology

This paper investigates the impact of the Christian faith on the Talensi people based on their encounter with and appropriation of the Christian message. The objective was to examine how the Christian message had been communicated to the Talensi and how they are expressing it in their daily lives. Data collection was carried out through interviews with key personalities. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide with semi-structured questions which provided space for respondents to express themselves freely regarding the questions put to them. The respondents included some pastors, elders and members from the

¹² Emmanuel . K. Asante, "Interpreting and Articulating the Faith: Lessons from Early Christian History for Africa" Today. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol 17 no. 1 (2014), 21 – 25.

¹³ Kuwornu – Adjaottor, J.E.T. " You Believe in God and Believe in God". *European Journal of Scientific Research* (Vol. 9 No. 19. 2014)

¹⁴ Solomon Sule – Saa. *The Challenge of Mother Tongue Scriptures to the African Context of Doing Biblical Studies*, *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2002), 7

¹⁵ Solomon's Sule – Saa, "The Redemptive Role of Mother – Tongue Scripture: The Case of the Dagomba and Konkomba of Northern Ghana, *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 11, No.1 (2008), 21.

Assemblies of God Church, Ghana Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, Deeper Life Bible Church, Salvation Army, the Apostolic church of Ghana and the Amazing Power Ministry, educationists which included a retired tutor, and a headmaster of the Salvation Army Basic School, and some students. The study interviewed twenty (20) personalities made up of the clergy, church elders, church members, educationists, and students. The objective was to ascertain the theological implications of the Bible for Christian conversion and expression.

The study sought to find out from the respondents their views on the importance of the Bible for their Christian lives and expression. It was to seek their opinion on their understanding and expression of the Christian faith despite their not having the Bible in their mother tongue. Again the study made use of secondary sources including books, journals, unpublished works, and the internet.

Results

The Talensi

The Talensi are an indigenous people group in the Upper East region of Ghana. They are found in the area east of the main Tamale-Bolgatanga high way. According to Peter Barker, the people speak *Talni* as both their mother tongue and vernacular in all their communities. *Talni* according to Barker is a Gur language of the Oti-Volta (North Ghana) sub group, closely related to Frafra. The people are referred to as Talensi and a single person is recognized as a *Talenga*. The chief town of the Talensi is Tongo which is the capital of the Talensi District Assembly. It used to be the Talensi-Nabdam District Assembly, but in 2012, an executive instrument of the then government separated the district into two, namely the Talensi district assembly and the Nabdam district assembly.

The Talensi language for a long time has not had a literacy tradition and till date has not been taught in the schools. The Talensi can be grouped into three main clans namely the Nayir comprising Puheg, Dikpieng, Gbeog, Kuoreg, Seog. The Talensi of the Hill country include Sii, Gorogo, Wakii, Tengzuk, Yamereg and Santeng. The Talensi of the mainland, include Zuo, Zubeong, Baare and Yameriga.

Population

The population of the Talensi District, according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census contained in an official report of the Ghana Statistical Service, stands at 84, 194 representing 50.3% males and 49.7 females. The population of the district constitutes 7.8% of the regional population which is 1, 046, 545. According to the report the district has a large rural population of 84.1% and a small urban population of 15.9%.¹⁶

In terms of education and literacy, the report captured 42.1% of the population as literate with 57.9% as non-literate (inability to read and write in English, French or the native language). The age groups with the highest proportion of the literate population is between 11-14 years representing 29.3% and followed by 15-19 years representing 29.2%.¹⁷

Religious Life and Thought

In terms of religion, the Talensi are predominantly traditionalists like the other Frafra groups such as the Gruni and the Nabdam. Samuel Atinga, writing about the Frafra, maintains that the Frafra religion and religious practices fall within the general framework of traditional religious practices all over Africa.¹⁸ The Talensi religion is informed by their worldview defined by their belief in *Naawun*, God or the Supreme Being. Like all other traditional societies, the Talensi regard *Naawun* as the Creator of the Universe, including human beings, and holds all power. They also believe that *Naawun* is transcendent but has commissioned the *Yaabnam* (ancestors) to superintend all the affairs of humans on earth. According to

¹⁶ Ghana Statistical Service, District Analytical Report, Talensi District. (October 2014), 31

¹⁷ Ghana Statistical Service, Talensi District, (2014), 31.

¹⁸ Samuel A. Atinga "Death and Dying: A Study of the Mortuary Rites of the Frafra of Northern Ghana in the light of the Christian Funeral Liturgy. An Attempt at Inculturation". Doctoral Thesis, Katholieke University, Leuven (unpublished), 6.

Barker, *Naawun* is believed to be “above all other gods, he knows all, sees all, and is all powerful”.¹⁹ The belief in the Supreme Being is evident in some Talensi prayers of thanksgiving and petitions expressed as *tetewunaamfara* (we praise God) and *yin nang song te* (God will help us).

The belief in the *Yaabnam*(ancestors) is the cardinal point of the Talensi religious life. The ancestral cult defines child naming, marriage, death and funeral rites, festivals as well as sickness and healing in the Talensi society. The first born male child is considered as a priest to offer the prescribed sacrifices to the family shrines in his father’s stead. Again all males are initiated into the sexton cult called the *bayaa*, responsible for the handling of corpses and digging of graves. Like all other traditional societies, the Talensi also believe that all physical events have their spiritual causation and this informs their practice of divination, referred to as *bakolog*. The *Tengdan*, apart from his political role as elder in his clan, is the chief priest of the *Teng* (earth cult) responsible for all the religious rites in the traditional groves.

As part of their religious obligations, the living descendants are responsible for offering sacrifices to the ancestors to ensure *sumaahom*(Peace)in every home. Against this background, Meyer Fortes asserts that the ancestors “though dead and gone from the physical world of the living are invisible but effective, and are accessible through the special medium of religious rituals”.²⁰

Religions Affiliation

The Ghana Statistical Service District Analytical report on the Talensi District captures the religious affiliation of the Talensi in terms of the population as follows

- Catholic – with a population of 15,038 representing 18.5% of the Population.
- Protestants – 5,122, representing 6.3% of the Population.
- Pentecostal / Charismatic – 14,053 representing 17.3% of the population.
- Other Christians – 1,087 representing 1.3% of the population.
- Islam – 2, 979 representing 3.7% of the population.
- Traditional – 37, 860 representing 46.6% of the population.

Discussion

Significance of Mother Tongue Bible Translation for Christian Conversion

In Ghana and Africa largely the lingua franca is English language by which school children are taught and examined. However, it is important to note that according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census report for the Talensi district, 57.9% of the total population of 81, 194 are non-literate with only 42.1% being literate in the English language. The same Census document reveals that the district has a large rural population of 84.1% and a small urban population of 15.9%.²¹

Majority of the respondents pointed out that unlike in the past, parents today encourage their children to enroll in the schools in order to study the English language which can guarantee them a better place in society. However, despite all these efforts, a greater percentage of the population remain non-literate. The reasons for this have been identified as the lack of schools in the rural areas where a greater percentage of the population resides, and a high drop-out rate. The position of the respondents presupposes that any efforts at proclaiming the Christian message in the English language and translating it orally to the audience in the mother tongue might not go far since a small proportion of the population might be reached. This seems to explain why students have been identified as constituting the largest proportion of the membership of the churches which use the English language for their services, notably the Fountain Gate Chapel in Tongo Central.

Unanimously, all the respondents agreed that translating the scriptures from the original languages to the native language is key to achieving the church’s mission of effective soul winning and Christian

¹⁹ Peter Barker. *People, languages and Religion of Northern Ghana*. (Accra: Asempa Publishers / GEC, 1986), 102.

²⁰ Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on the Talensi Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 195

²¹ Ghana Statistical Service, *District Analytical Report, Talensi District*, (2014), 31

conversion in much greater dimension. In their view, this would give the native people a better understanding of the Christian message coming to them and also put them in a position to make informed decisions.

The Roman Catholic Missiologist Louis Luzbetak says that conversion means “a turning away from old ways to new ways, a basic re-orientation in premises and goals, a whole-hearted acceptance of a new set of values affecting the ‘convert’ as well as his social group ...”²² The change effected must become living part of the cultural organism. Conversion indicates a change from one set of loyalties to another which involves critical experiences. It involves a transformation in terms of values, relationships and attitudes to God, himself and others in the same socio-cultural context.

In line with this some of the respondents expressed their views on the cultural conflicts that seem to exist in Christian conversion among the Talensi. Most elderly Talensi view Christian conversion as a betrayal of the ancestors which is seen as a risky venture. Again, some Talensi who claim to convert to the Christian faith could be seen involving themselves in traditional religious practices. The reasons for this attitude stems from a lack of understanding of the Christian teaching on the part of the native people. According to 2 Cor 5:17, the person coming to Christ is seen as a new person. The proclamation of the Christian message calling on people to change from their “old ways” and come to Jesus is often misconstrued to mean a break with one’s traditional background. However, it should be noted that people do not need to stop being members of their tribes in order to be Christians. Instead they are to live respond to the Christian faith and live it out in their socio-cultural context in a relevant worship of God.

Another issue worth noting is the lack of literary tradition for local language, *Talni*. It is only spoken by the people but is not taught in the schools as a Ghanaian language. Since the school children do not have access to any materials in *Talni*, it becomes a problem when they are to relate the English language to their mother tongue. Many of the respondents were of the view that it was not difficult for the school children to speak their mother tongue, which is also the vernacular of the entire society. However, they expressed concern that there is a problem when relating their mother tongue to the English language. This situation presents a growing gap between what they speak and what they hear by way of oral translation. This is because most of the people who translate the Christian message orally (interpreting) in the churches find it difficult to communicate effectively because of lack of vocabulary. This affirms B. Y Quarshie’s point that presenting Jesus to a culture without presenting the Bible to them in their mother tongue will be a futile exercise that will not have maximum impact.

He concludes that;

Through the mother – tongue scriptures, new truths are taught and learnt about Jesus Christ as happened in the New Testament itself. Mother tongue Scriptures do not only facilitate a meaningful participation in the world of the Bible, they also afford a communal study of the Bible. Those who do not speak any international language can nevertheless hear God speaking to them in their own languages as happened at Pentecost (Acts 2:1 – 11).²³

The position of Quarshie does not however, mean that without the native people’s language the Christian message cannot be communicated to them as local translators are often used to translate the sermons preached in English into the local language. It has been found out that the practice does not yield the desired results due to the problem of lack of vocabulary as mentioned earlier. It is imperative to present the gospel to people in an appealing manner that would easily give the target audience a sense of identity, and prevent them from seeing the Christian message in an abstract manner.

It can be argued from these views that the scriptures and the Christian faith presented in a foreign language could easily be designated as a foreign religion. This is the reason why Christianity has taken a long time to penetrate the Talensi society. The translation of the Bible into the Talensi mother tongue is key to Christian conversion and is therefore very imperative.

²² Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*. (Techy, Illinois: Divine Word, 1970), 6.

²³ B. Y. Quarshie, “The Bible in African Christianity: Kwame Bediako and the Reshaping of an African Heritage”. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol 14 no. 2 (Dec. 2011), 3 – 14.

Implication Mother Tongue Bible Translations for Christian Expression and Discipleship Development

Gary Kuhune sees the disciple as a Christian who is growing in conformity to Christ, is achieving fruit in evangelism and working in personal follow-up to conserve his fruit.²⁴ This definition explains discipleship as centered on maturing into the image of Jesus Christ, winning others for him and preserving them in the Christian faith. Based on this the respondents were asked if the Christian convert could grow into maturity in Christ without the Scriptures. They expressed worry that a majority of the people could not express the Christian faith effectively for want of understanding. One respondent noted that since Christian growth was contingent on a better understanding and practice of the Christian teaching, it was imperative that the people understand what ever is involved in the Christian faith. He said further that since a majority of the people is not able to do personal Bible study, the situation affects their spiritual growth. Another respondent on his part also said that Bible study in the church is carried out in the same way just as is done during Sunday service, reading from the English Bible and translated orally into *Talniby* a translator. He concludes that the situation is not good enough for church growth and personal discipleship, as the people find it difficult to understand the teaching of the Bible from their cultural point of view.

It is important to note that in the Christian Community there are many people with different capacities. Not all the people can understand the Christian principles in a good manner. Whereas some can understand the Christian message when delivered in English, others who are not literate in English often become confused when the message is translated orally to them, since they are unable to relate the message to their socio-cultural realities.

In the book of Acts, we read that the early Christian community in Jerusalem committed themselves to the apostles teaching (Acts 2:42) as it was delivered to them in their mother tongue. No wonder, these early Christians grew in their relationship with God that made them courageous enough to stand up in defence of the Christian faith (Acts 4:23). Again in Acts 17:11 we are also told about the Berean Christians who daily searched the scriptures to find out for themselves what they were told in church. They did so because the scriptures were available in their mother tongue and offered them the opportunity to read by themselves and for themselves.

Kwame Bediako has intimated that the ability to hear in one's own language and to express in one's language ones response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounter with the divine realm.²⁵ He stresses the significance of language in the appropriation of the Christian message and argues that it is through the mother tongue that God seeks to communicate His purposes to humanity. In the Book of Acts, we are told of an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the Hebrew scriptures, but could not understand what he read until Philip came to his rescue (Acts 8:30 – 31). As far as the Talensi are concerned, Oral translation from the English language into *Talni*, often creates ambiguities in the minds of Talensi Christians. This is because they often find it difficult to relate what they hear with what they know from their traditional backgrounds. For instance in Matt. 28:19-20, Christian converts are to be baptized as a sign of the public declaration of their new status. However, in the Talensi culture, there is no element in the rituals that relates to water Baptism. In the Frafra Bible it is rendered as bathing or being bathed with water. This idea creates theological problems for Talensi Christians in that water baptism does not connote bathing to remove sin as has been understood by certain people. One respondent disclosed that even though she had in her possession a Frafra Bible she could not read it or understand it even some one reads it to her. Even though *Talni* is close to the Frafra there is a problem with vocabulary in relation to intelligibility.

Similarly the Christian teaching of judgment reserved for the future does not make sense to the Talensi who consider judgment as now and is executed by the ancestors who are held as the custodians of

²⁴ Gary W. Kuhne , The Dynamics of Discipleship Training. (Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 1977), 130.

²⁵ Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: A Renewal of a Non – Western Religion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 60.

the moral code in the traditional society. Therefore the native people often accuse the Christians of lowering the standard of ethical and moral living thereby making the people careless in their daily living.

It can be noted that without a proper understanding of the scriptures, Christians would not be in a position to grow into spiritual maturity. While some will fall off by the wayside, others will become targets of deceptive spirits which may put them in confused situations. The respondents were unanimous in their view that the lack of the Scriptures in the Talensi mother tongue has had a negative impact on the spiritual growth of some Talensi Christians. They argued that the syncretistic lifestyles of some Talensi Christian converts really stem from a lack of proper understanding of the Christian faith. They explained that some Talensi attend church but secretly engage in traditional religious practices for fear of the shins and the elders. The respondents proposed that it is only when they get the scriptures in their mother tongue that they would begin to see Christianity to be addressing their everyday experiences. In this sense the Christian faith would become domesticated and rooted in the Talensi culture and promote effective discipleship and church development.

CONCLUSION

There is a connection between the Bible and Christian conversion and expression. People can only respond to the Christian message and make informed decisions regarding its acceptance or otherwise, if they are able to make meaning out of what is communicated to them. A meaningful message is one that is heard in a language that is understood by a people. It is only in this way can the people relate the message to their lives. The Christian faith can only make a meaningful impact on traditional people such as the Talensi, if they are able to hear God speak mother tongue. Mother tongue Bible translation is not just an academic exercise, it is a missiological imperative by which we can advance the Christian faith in traditional societies.

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